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The Vale and Ridgeway Project: Excavations at Marcham/Frillford 2006: interim report

Introduction to the Vale and Ridgeway Project

The background to the project and site has been detailed in the previous five interim reports in *South Midlands Archaeology* (Lock and Gosden 2002; Lock and Gosden 2003; Lock et. al. 2004; Gosden and Lock 2005; Lock and Gosden 2006), as well as on the project web site:

http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/research/research_projects/marcham

A more in-depth analysis of our findings since the project started in 2001, including the 2006 season, has been synthesized in a forthcoming publication (Kamash, Gosden and Lock forthcoming).

As in previous years the excavation acts as a training excavation, and is committed to education in the widest sense. This season's excavation saw participants from across the world including Norway, USA, Australia and Singapore as well as from a selection of British Universities. Education Officers were on-site throughout the month of excavation and gave tours to many visitors including groups from local schools and community organizations. Various activities were organized for National Archaeology Day when c. 1,000 people visited the site. Talks are given throughout the year to local societies and community groups. This was the second of two seasons partly funded by a Lottery (Local Heritage Initiative) grant that enabled local people to participate in the excavation.

The 2006 excavation season

The 2006 excavations had five main goals: 1) further investigating the interior of the large circular structure (the possible semi-amphitheatre) and its western entrance which involved extending existing trench 9 westwards (known as trench 29); 2) further investigating the probable shrine to the south-west of the large circular structure in trench 24 and the area between here and the western entrance (trench 30); 3) exploring further the entrance through the temple *temenos* wall in trenches 15 and 32, investigating the pathway through the *temenos* towards the temple (trenches 31 and 26) and defining the south-eastern corner of the *temenos* wall (trenches 27 and 28); 4) further exploring the building in trench 22 between the *temenos* and the large circular structure; and 5) further exploring the archaeology identified to the far south of the site in trench 21. As part of this, work resumed in a number of existing trenches, with extensions made to facilitate our research goals, as well as in several new trenches. In all areas, the initial stripping of turf and/or removal of backfill was assisted by machine shovel, with work continuing by

hand once archaeological deposits were reached. The 2006 field season focused largely upon the Romano-British components of the site, and little if any prehistoric material was encountered. The location of all trenches is shown in Figure 1.

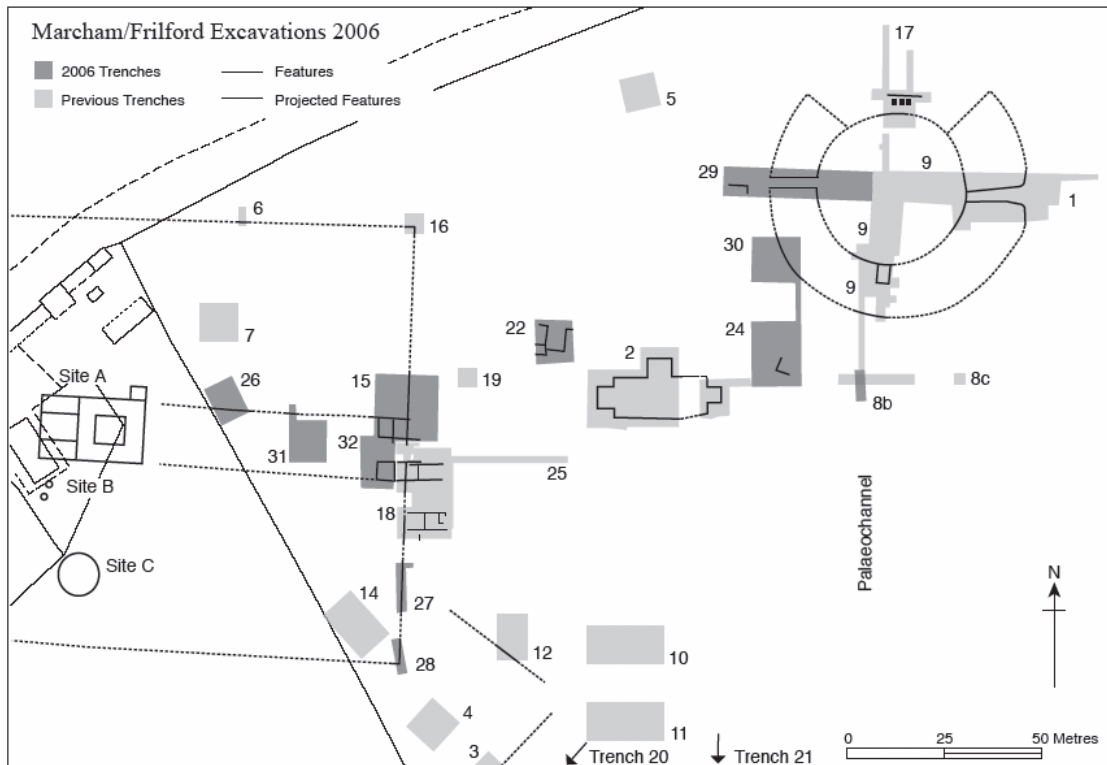


Fig. 1: Plan of the excavated trenches at Marcham/Frilford 2001-2006, also showing the outline of the *temenos* and temple buildings excavated in 1937-8.

The Large Circular Structure (Trenches 9 and 29)

This large and enigmatic feature was first discovered by aerial photography in 1976 and identified as an amphitheatre by Hingley (1985) based on a small excavation. Each season since 2001 we have been excavating various parts of this structure, which consists of an arena wall c. 40 m diameter with surrounding low earthen bank. The wall itself survives in remarkably good condition. At each of the cardinal points is some kind of feature, obvious from the aerial photography and later geophysical survey. It is likely that this structure is a semi-amphitheatre of a type similar to those found in northern Gaul (Kamash *et al.* forthcoming).

The existing L-shaped trench inside the interior of this structure was extended c. 40 m to the west (trench 29) through the western entrance and banks. Excavation was hampered to some extent by flooding inside the structure.

Capstones were removed (and later replaced) from several sections of the main drain and its feeders and at the junctions between these. The sections through the junctions of the feeder drains with the main drain suggest that the entire network was contemporary and

part of the original conception of the building. The drains did not have a constructed base and therefore must have been built to deal with the fluctuating water table characteristic of this area.

Excavation just to the south-east of the central area revealed more of the later phase features identified in 2005. The probable beamslot [9390] continued further to the east and seemed to have marked the edge of a rough working surface made of robbed stone pieces. Late 4th-century pottery was retrieved from this surface. The surface ran under the baulks, so widening of the trench in this area may reveal more about this elusive later activity.

To the west, excavations in trench 29 revealed the same sequence for the interior of the structure as that identified to the south and east i.e. the ground surface was stripped down to the natural clay and a deposit of sand laid down as a floor surface; at the end of its life the arena was filled with thick deposits of clay that rich in pottery and animal bones. The continuation of the western feeder drain, which one would expect to run through this trench, has not yet been identified, but further excavation next year should confirm its course.

The arena walls in the west also displayed the same characteristics as those encountered elsewhere, including the white plaster with red lines. A slot through the western entrance, which will be continued next season, has revealed a substantial cut through the bedrock, which may have been covered with pink plaster, and a masonry step into the arena. The pathway into the arena seems to have been flanked to the north and south by parallel banks, which had considerable stone packing. The pathway between the banks seems to have been protected from ploughing by this packing; further to the west beyond the flanking banks, the pathway had undergone significant plough damage and was identifiable only as a thin spread of gritty mortar. Cut into the top of the southern flanking bank was a masonry building, three sides of which have thus far been found. Several small groups of tightly-packed, upright stones, which seem to be neither postpads nor post-packing, were found inside the walls and along the line of the pathway outside the building. These stone groups are similar to those found in trenches 24 and 8b (see below), though very few artefacts were retrieved from the general area.

Activity to the southwest of the large circular structure (Trenches 24 and 30)

Excavations continued in trench 24 to elucidate the nature of the structure to the south-west of the semi-amphitheatre. As in previous years a large number of worked bone and copper alloy pins were found in the area. These objects seem to have been associated with the many stone groups (described above) characteristic of this trench, which suggests that these stone groups may have been *foci* for deposition. The ritual nature of this area was further confirmed by the excavation of a complete sheep/goat burial in the southern part of the trench.

To the north between trenches 24 and 29, a new trench (30) was opened to investigate the banks. To the south of this trench, in very close proximity to trench 24, a complete cattle burial cut into the banks was excavated; again it seems significant and suggestive of ritual

that two animal burials have so far been found in this area. Excavation of the banks confirmed that they were constructed from interleaving deposits of sand and clay, which probably derived from the creation of the arena. The banks overlay a preserved Iron Age soil, in which no cut features of prehistoric date were identified.

The *temenos* area (Trenches 15, 32, 31, 26, 27 and 28)

The temple and its *temenos* were originally identified and excavated by Bradford and Goodchild (1939) in the garden of the Noah's Ark Inn. A large part of the eastern end of this *temenos* lies in Trendles Field. In previous seasons, excavations in this area have revealed: the line of the *temenos* wall from the north-eastern corner to just south of the *temenos* entrance; a large number of Iron Age pits, a large Roman pit and a midden in the south-eastern corner of the *temenos* and buildings directly outside the eastern wall of the *temenos* either side of its entrance. Excavations in the *temenos* area in this season saw continued investigation of the entrance area (trench 15) as well as new trenches directly inside the entrance (trench 32), over the pathway towards the temple (trenches 31 and 26) and at the south-eastern corner of the *temenos* wall (trenches 27 and 28).

Trenches 15 and 32 showed evidence for structures directly inside the entrance and flanking either side of the temple pathway; these structures are still under investigation, but initial work suggests that they were two-roomed structures, possibly open onto the pathway. Further to the north in trench 15, inside the *temenos* a complete sheep/goat burial was excavated close to a plastered square, which may have been the foundation for an altar. The animal was buried with two pots, one of which was a complete Oxford colour-coat vessel in an unusual small jar form (P. Booth pers. comm.). Another significant find from this season's excavations was that the temple pathway was bordered, to the north at least, by a substantial masonry wall. This wall had been preceded by an earlier phase of timber uprights marked by a series of large postholes.

The line of the eastern *temenos* wall was traced further to the south in trench 27. The south-eastern corner was subsequently found in trench 28. In both trenches, as elsewhere, the *temenos* wall had been extensively robbed. Also as elsewhere, a cobbled surface was found to run alongside the wall on the outside of the *temenos*.

The buildings in Trench 22

Trench 22 was first opened in 2004 and revealed the southern end of a two-roomed building, with external post-holes suggesting a veranda, part of a sizeable oven and a small western annexe. The scale of the excavation and the paucity of finds in 2004 left the size and use of the building open to question, along with its relationship to other structures on the site. In 2006 the trench was extended northwards by 7 m in an attempt to address those issues.

In this season the complete plan in stone foundations of a three-sided Romano-British rectangular building open to the north was revealed. The north end of the western north-south wall was finished with a sub-circular and carefully constructed wall-end, about 0.7 m in diameter. This was perhaps built as the base for a pillar, statue or monumental wall terminal. There were hints of a corresponding terminal at the end of the eastern wall, but

it had been heavily plough damaged. The interior of the main building probably had a beaten earth floor, which had generally been kept clean. Close to the western wall of the building, a large oval hearth (c. 1 m long) was excavated. This building may have been a shrine visited as part of a progression from or to the main arena and its associated ritual areas.

Post-holes suggested an earlier wooden phase of construction as has also been suggested for other buildings on the site, such as those in trench 18. Later walls, dividing the rooms of the earlier stone building, and less well-constructed hearths and working hollows suggest a re-use of the main building, probably in the late Roman period.

Activity in the south of Trendles Field (Trench 21)

In 2004 a geological test trench across an east-west palaeochannel of the River Ock to the far south of Trendles Field revealed unexpected archaeological deposits. In order to understand more fully the archaeology of this largely unexplored part of the site, trench 21 was reopened this season. Excavations uncovered a Roman well surrounded by a series of cobbled surfaces. Waterlogged deposits in the well contained a complete pot and a leather shoe. The well was remodelled and its mouth widened, probably in the later Roman period. The well, which might have served a near-by, currently undetected, building, suggests strongly that this southern part of the site may prove to be as rich archaeologically as the northern part of the field. It is unclear at present how this area might have co-ordinated, if at all, with the wider religious complex.

Aims for 2007

Work in the 2006 season has confirmed many of our interpretations of the site and has consolidated our knowledge of the sequences inside the arena, its banks and in trench 24 (Kamash *et al.* forthcoming). Work in the area of the semi-amphitheatre in 2007 should tie up any remaining loose ends in trenches 9, 29 and 24. Priority areas for further investigation will be the extent of the banks to the north of the structure and how the structure is related to the north-south palaeochannel.

Significant advances have been made in understanding how the *temenos* area was articulated and used. Further work must be done to understand the nature of the structures inside the *temenos* entrance and to elucidate the nature of ritual activity inside the enclosure. This latter aim may see a return and extension to the large pit and midden in trench 14 in the south-eastern corner of the *temenos*.

Finally, it appears that the southern part of the site may contain a wealth of well-preserved archaeological remains. The presence of the well suggests the possibility of further buildings or activity in this area. Continued excavations in this part of the site may reveal the extent of the religious complex and how it articulated as a whole.

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